THE PROJECT WHISPERER

BRIAN PEARSE SAYS ENGINEERING IS A LOT LIKE RIDING HORSES: WITH PATIENCE AND GOOD COMMUNICATION, YOU CAN DO GREAT THINGS

GROWING UP IN STURGEON County, north of Edmonton, Brian Pearse's life revolved around riding and showing the horses on his family's farmland. It wasn't until high school that he started thinking about a career plan. "I thought I would probably be an electrician, like my dad," he says. "This notion of engineering — I really didn't know any people with that type of background to talk to, but it was intriguing," he says. So he did a little research and talked to the school counselor. He was starting from scratch — he had not even taken physics at that point — but engineering "became a goal without really knowing a whole lot of what it entailed."

He took engineering at the University of Alberta, but upon graduating still did not have much non-horse-based, real-world experience. So he started with Stewart Weir and Company, a surveying and engineering company established in Alberta in 1912, and he received all the experience he could want. The company was small at the time, and Pearse was immediately put on a highway project survey crew, where he started learning about… pretty much everything. "I literally went out and surveyed the project, came in, processed the data, did the design, put the contract together, tendered it, and was basically the project manager," he says. "Having the ability to be involved in every single step was unique."

He turned that experience into a 30-year career, almost all of which was spent at Stewart Weir, where he eventually became CEO. He says his life has had many "aha" moments, but that his career has been "more of a build than a boom." He credits mentors like former assistant deputy minister of

Alberta Transportation Nester Chorney and the late Reg Kotch, who worked with Alberta Transportation and was the mayor of the Town of Stony Plain. They taught him to have an appreciation of the entire job, from the work in the field to the importance of invoicing. By the time he became Stewart Weir's manager of transportation, Pearse "felt ready for anything."

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actual engineering, that's because he does. "I love being an engineer, but I was really driven by the business aspect. I enjoyed the partnership with the client and the contractor to deliver. And I always felt like we could be more efficient, take on bigger projects and bring more services to clients."

After a long career and term as president of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta, Pearse now frequently works with First Nations. He says he appreciates their patience and intention

when it comes to new projects. "If we have a meeting, it's not unusual that they start the meeting with a prayer. They're looking for different projects and they discuss them very deeply. Success to them is probably a little bit different than how traditional companies see it. And that has to be recognized."

Pearse stepped away from the world of horses while he and his wife — whom he met while taking riding lessons — raised their kids, but he says the equestrian and engineering worlds aren't so far apart. "The thing with horses is it's not as simple as just going: This is the goal, this is what we're gonna do. They don't typically respond well to that," he says. Similarly, clients — or staff, or the projects themselves — don't always respond well to that thinking. There are always things that get in the way of advancing a project, things that are beyond your control. But if you have patience, and communicate well, you can reach that goal."

— **CORY SCHACHTEL**